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EVENING 17,345

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"Aboard last plane en route Homestead with ETA 930 local, carrying last of 1,113 liberated prisoners.

"Arrangements completed for 1,000 women and children among prisoners relatives to sail for U. S. on African Pilot on Wednesday.

"Have obtained certain pledges for early release American prisoners. Operation Mercy regarded as completed.

*"Merry Christmas,
James B. Donovan."*

With these words, Attorney Donovan signalled the completion of his mission on Christmas Eve, and freedom has again come, joyously in the season of peace and goodwill, to those who were willing to do more than talk about the rights of man.

It is fitting — nay, it is close to a Christmas miracle — that Castro decided to also free the 1,000 relatives of the Cuban fighters who are still in Havana. The Cuban prime minister tacked what he called "a Christmas bonus" to his agreement to free the invasion captives.

With the exchange the country has paid a just debt. The cause of rightness has been elevated and served; we have done our utmost.

* * *

The Cubans who sailed for the Bay of Pigs left with high ideals. They sought freedom for their country. Their failure was not their fault.

For many months President Kennedy has felt an involvement in their plight. The Bay of Pigs hung like an albatross around his neck, and even the recent victory of the missiles could not erase his responsibility from his mind. It has been with him a long time — and it may turn out that the involvement of the United States has been larger than we now imagine.

American industry has contributed millions of dollars worth of food and drugs, and the airlines and the steamship companies had to perform miracles of logistics to get the mercy airlift in operation. Foodstuffs, medicine and drugs all had to be transported at the height of the Christmas rush, and operations were on a virtual around-the-clock basis.

Officially, the participation of the United States government has been limited to co-ordinating efforts by Attorney General Robert Kennedy and a government group that operated as an informal committee. Key Congressional leaders were consulted to see if government funds could be used for part of the ransom and the answer came back negative. Thus the official position of the government is now that no CIA funds or funds from the President's unvouchered allotment were used to help free the prisoners.

Instead, the medicine and supplies were contributed by drug companies who could take the contributions off their income tax return. This is certainly the least that the United States could do for the Cuba freedom fighters. We are sure that all Americans rejoice in their return, despite the enormous price that was placed on their heads.

The foodstuffs and medicines bartered in the exchange are not of strategic value to the Castro regime. In the world, the United States will get no little credit for not running out on the Cubans whom we dumped off on the beaches, and Castro will not receive much credit for marketing the prisoners like so many head of cattle.

Thus, all in all, America has lived up to its responsibility. Although ransom is new to this country, it was regrettably required in this case.